

Solemnity of St Benedict (C)  
(Proverbs 2:1-9 / Matthew 5:1-12)  
11.07.2016

The Book of Psalms could be considered as constituting the staple diet of the Benedictine monk.

This ancient collection of prayers formulated by God's Chosen People opens with a word which punctuated the gospel passage we heard proclaimed this morning: *Happy*.

St Benedict, whose thought was clearly fashioned by the Psalter and who sought to propose nothing other to his monks than *a way of life with the gospel as their guide*, makes it clear at the very outset of his Rule that he addresses himself to those who *long for life and desire happiness*. In the Prologue to the Rule, he poses this question: *Who is the one who longs for life and desires to see good days in happiness?* He goes on: *If this what you long for, then come.*

We can and should find happiness in our monastic life.

*Happiness* was the last word of today's first reading.

Happiness is the hallmark of every Christian who strives to live his or her life in the spirit of the beatitudes.

St Francis de Sales has said that *a saint who is sad is a sad saint indeed*. What is implied by that statement is that a sad saint is not really a saint at all. Understand me. I am not saying that we don't all have legitimate reasons to feel sorrowful on occasion. Clearly we have. The greatest saints, who knew pain and suffering in their lives at times, were given to feel deep sadness as a result of these tribulations. Jesus Himself is depicted in the Passion Narrative to have been *sorrowful to the point of death*. Deep sadness gripped Jesus at other times in the gospel accounts. He is shown to have shed tears on more than one occasion.

It is important to recognise that felt sadness can be a very healthy response to certain situations; and when it is denied, it can lead to other more destructive emotions and behaviours.

It should be said, however, that the spiritual tradition has always been cautious around the sadness we feel and ordered extreme vigilance in its regard. It has consistently insisted that we must not nurse our sorrow in a way that leaves it free to so invade our hearts and pervade our lives that we find ourselves completely submerged, totally overwhelmed, by it. We can all, so easily, give into the temptation of feeling sorry for ourselves and we can even attain an unhealthy pleasure from settling into a melancholic state. There are those for whom feeling miserably self-satisfied in sadness – being able to say *woe is me* – is a source of perverted happiness.

The Desert Fathers put us on our guard against all unhealthy sadness, warning us that the evil one lurks at the door of a sorrowful heart – trying to gain access, ready to reek havoc and bring about destruction. The ancient monks could see the dangers of wallowing in self-pity. St Benedict is also attentive in regard to this matter in his Rule for Monks. The Rule stresses that the abbot, the cellarer and other spiritual fathers in the community are to be vigilant that no monk is overcome with sorrow. For Benedict, saddened hearts are at risk and in peril. This is underlined for us especially in what we call *The Penal Code* of the Rule – that section of the Rule which deals with how to try to win back brothers who have strayed, and, in some way, have excommunicated themselves from their brethren, as a result. *Sempectae*, that is to say *wise elders* of the community, are to be prevailed upon by the abbot to go to offer some *secret comfort* and *discreet consolation* to their wayward brethren, lest the sorrow and distress of their excommunication submerge and overwhelm these latter.

Clearly, Benedict sees great importance in his monks knowing joy. This is because he sees

that sadness has such a weakening effect. Benedict realises what the psalmist teaches when it says: *The joy of the Lord is our strength.*

I won't attempt to be exhaustive in my considerations of Benedict's teaching on happiness, fullness of life and well-being in the Rule. This teaching certainly underpins all he proposes as a way of life for his monks and would have us live in the monastery.

What I will do this morning is just say a few words about what St Benedict teaches around joy *in* sorrow and happiness *in* pain. In other words, what Benedict has to say that may help us to live through the inevitable sufferings which are part of every human existence, at some stage or other.

Benedict invents nothing new in what he proposes. His teaching is quite simply based on the insights of the Apostle Paul and other New Testament writers – and also, it seems to me, on what Jesus Himself had to say in the text of the Beatitudes that we heard read in this morning's gospel passage.

When we read the Beatitudes we hear Jesus speak of happiness in poverty, in mourning, in hunger and in thirst for what is not yet given, in persecution, in maltreatment etc. The Beatitudes speak of happiness *in* all these circumstances and not just a happiness to come after one has worked one's way through these sad situations.

The insight afforded by the Beatitudes leads Benedict to say that the monk can rejoice even as he experiences hardships and all kinds of injustices. (We find this articulated at the end of the Prologue of the Rule and in Chapter 7 of the Rule, especially in what Benedict says in the sixth step of humility which deals with the experience of unfair treatment.)

One particular place in the Rule where Benedict speaks of joy and happiness seems to me of particular significance and worth examining. It is the Chapter in which he speaks of *The Observance of Lent*. I suspect most of you (and maybe even the monks here, when they forget the teaching of our *Rule of Life*) are inclined to think of Lent as a mournful season. Not so St Benedict! For Benedict, Lent is meant to be a *joyful season* of the year. Indeed, Benedict's insight about Lenten joy has actually found its way into the Roman liturgy, where it has been enshrined in those Prefaces to the Eucharistic Prayer which speak of the *joyful season of Lent*. Liturgical scholars attribute this presentation of Lent in the Roman liturgy to the influence of early Benedictine monasteries which were gathered around Rome. These Houses of Prayer influenced some of the formulations which we find in some of the oldest sacramentaries and missals.

Interestingly, Benedict tells us in the Rule that *the life of the monk should always have a Lenten character to it*. What he is saying there is perhaps the direct opposite to what some might expect a Lenten character to imply. From Benedict's perspective, for a life to always have a Lenten character to it, is for that life to be joyful – it is for it to be animated by a joy which is rooted in the fact that the monk is ever looking forward to, and even anticipating, the risen life of Holy Easter.

In chapter 49 of the Rule, Benedict speaks of *the joy of spiritual desire*. That little phrase underlines the anticipatory dimension of joy – as do the Beatitudes. I believe we can hear what Jesus says in this light: Happy the sorrowful who are *yet to be* comforted... They shall be comforted and not just in some distant future; they can actually anticipate what is yet to come in the here and now. Happy those who hunger and thirst for justice, they shall be satisfied... Again, their promised satisfaction, which is yet to come, can already be a source of happiness in their lives in the present.

In the same chapter 49 of the Rule, Benedict encourages his monks to do whatever penance they do *with and in the joy of the Holy Spirit*.

For St Benedict, joy clearly stands at the heart of Lent. He would have us hold on to it there.

When he suggests this Benedict is actually being quite original. Although he draws a lot on the *Rule of the Master* in so many places in his Rule – and on other ancient monastic Rules as well – Benedict is the first monastic legislator to speak of *the joyful season of Lent*. This is remarkable and worth noting. It says a lot to us not only about how Benedict approached Lent, but, taken alongside what he says elsewhere about the difficulties we encounter in life, about how he sees joy being possible in other moments of challenge and/or situations of affliction.

So, while we think and hear talk of *Franciscan joy* or that Dominican *drink called happiness*, it is good for us to be reminded that joy is at the very heart of our own spiritual tradition as Benedictine monks. It should be an attitude we seek to cultivate every day in our lives, since our life should always have the specific Lenten character to it – that specific Benedictine Lenten character to it which is one of anticipatory joy.

While the Beatitudes speak in terms of *happiness* (good fortune really), the Rule is more inclined to speak of *joy*.

There is clearly a connection between joy and happiness, of course, but there is a nuance as well.

And so, we might ask: what is the connection between happiness and joy and what is the nuance or contrast between them?

I remember once hearing things explained in a way which I will try to echo for you here. As I remember it, the person speaking said: *Happiness stems from joy*. What I understood to be implied by that statement is that with happiness we are more at the surface level of things: how we *feel* ourselves to be and/or how we are perceived to be by others. With joy, we are situated at a more profound level of being. Joy is situated deeper within us than what we ourselves can feel and what others may perceive.

Perhaps I can put it this way: our happiness is in *our* sentiment, whereas our joy is in God: joy is rooted in the Lord, who is its source. (The psalmist speaks of *the joy of the Lord* being our strength, just as he speaks of *the happiness of the many* being just *their* happiness.)

What I want to draw forth from this reflection is that while our longing to be happy could makes us a little self-centred, joy in our hearts makes us more God-focused; it propels us out of ourselves to others.

I suspect that this is why St Benedict prefers to speak in terms of joy and uses that word more than he does the word happiness.

An American Benedictine monk wrote this little line which I noted some years ago: *Joy can sustain us through the various stages of life*. He went on to say: *If we are willing to give up the search for happiness, we may find joy*. (I would nuance that latter statement slightly. I would say: if we are willing to go beyond, or go deeper than, just *our* search for happiness, we may, indeed, we surely will, enter into *God's own* joy.) The American monk concluded his reflection by saying: *Joy exists where happiness and suffering meet and intermingle*.

Is there not something very reassuring in that message for us today?

*Joy can sustain us through the various stages of life* – including the most painful.

*Joy exists where happiness and suffering meet and intermingle*. In all our lives happiness and suffering are inclined to meet and intermingle. In those situations we are called to find true joy.

Wherever we are at in our life journey today, whatever happiness and whatever suffering may be ours, may the Lord's own joy be given to us to sustain us on the way.

If I opened this reflection by referring you to the first word of the psalter, *Happy*, as I end this

reflection, I think it important to come back to and reinforce even more that other line from the Book of Psalms to which I have also referred in this meditation: *The joy of the Lord is our strength.*

If we are to live our lives according to the gospel we need strength. The psalmist tells us what consolidates our strength and fortifies us is *the joy of the Lord.*

A joyful attitude is surely a grace for each one of us to ask for today. We entered into this Eucharistic celebration by singing the introit, *Gaudeamus: Let us rejoice, let us find joy in the Lord.*

It has been said that *joy is found in holding together Jesus, others and yourself.*

Our Rule calls upon us *to prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ.* That is Jesus.

It also calls upon us *to love with one another with the chaste love members of one family should hold in their hearts for each other.* That is others.

The Rule would also have us live truly self-aware lives – not in any self-absorbed way, I hasten to add, but in a way that has us able to say to the Lord and to those with whom we share our lives who ask us to be there for them: *here I am.* This *here I am* is the true self, the myself/yourself of each one of us here. We need to be aware of our self and ready to offer it to God and for others, if we are to come to know true joy in our hearts.

May this day see us re-engage ourselves *to run in the way of the gospel* which Benedict speaks of as *the way of life* in the Prologue of his Rule, promising us, using very beautiful language, that *as we progress in this way of life (...), we shall run on the path (...) our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight, exuberant in the true joy of love.*